

RANCHING AND WILDLIFE

WAYNE E. LONG, Multiple Use Managers, Inc., P.O. Box L, West Point, CA 95255

TRANSACTIONS WESTERN SECTION THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY 22:22-24

While I have personally been involved in managing wildlife on ranch and rangelands for over twenty years, it has only been recently that the rancher has shown much interest in managing his wildlife resources in conjunction with his other ranch operations.

Ranchers have always had an interest in wildlife, and with few exceptions have enjoyed having different species of wildlife sharing habitat with their domestic livestock. The majority hunt the different game species found on their lands, and even some lease hunting rights to other individuals. However, the ranchers that have actively become involved in managing their wildlife resources are few and far between.

There are a few examples where the landowner has shown an above average interest in his wildlife resources, and has included wildlife in his management objectives. In all cases the incentive has been to increase profits. The following examples are ones in which I have had a certain amount, if not total, management responsibility for the wildlife resources.

The first example is the Dye Creek Ranch of some 67,000 acres located in Tehama County, California. The property is used predominately as winter range for 4,000 to 6,000 head of cattle. However, since 1965, when I was first hired as a wildlife manager, it has been managed as a hunting preserve as well. I had the pleasure of managing the preserve for eight years. As can be imagined with the sizeable cattle operation, a lot of cooperation has been necessary. In fact, in many cases the two operations have complimented each other.

While the livestock manager was not overjoyed with having an active hunting and wildlife management program on the land, he did find some advantages to it, and he was able to carry out his programs without any major conflicts or problems, including any decrease in livestock numbers. The livestock manager and I were able to agree on a number of management needs that benefited both of our programs and included such things as water development, range improvement and improved access. What it meant was instead of one budget paying the entire cost, we shared the expenses thereby making these improvements more cost effective. The overall effect for the ranch was increased revenue.

Another example where a rancher has taken advantage of his wildlife resources and developed a very profitable new business is on the 54,000 acre Santa Rosa Island, located thirty miles off of the California coast from Santa Barbara. The ranch carries between 3,000 and 6,000 feeder cattle year-round. Roosevelt elk and mule deer had been introduced to the island in approximately 1912. However, not until 1979 when I was contacted by the landowner and we started a hunting program did these animals figure into the management of the property. In the seven years we have been operating the hunting program it has generated over a million dollars in hunting revenues. There is no doubt that in the last few years it has been more profitable than the cattle operation. Hunting revenues could be even greater, however the landowners are reluctant to enlarge the hunting operation to where it might conflict with the livestock operation. This reasoning is important, for I think it represents how many cattlemen feel about their operations. They are not only reluctant to get involved in something they know little about, such as managing wildlife, but also do not want to change their way of life, a life that is centered around livestock production. It is very understandable when many of the ranch ownerships go back three or four generations, as on Santa Rosa Island. However, as we know, times are changing, and fast.

With present economic conditions of the livestock industry, we are seeing an increased interest in landowners becoming involved in managing their wildlife resources, particularly when they consider they are receiving about the same price for their cattle as they did twenty years ago. Yet the price for hunting most species has increased five hundred percent. For example, twenty years ago when we first started Dye Creek we charged \$100 for deer hunting privileges. Today the fee is \$500.

Another example and one that was initiated this past waterfowl season is located in Lassen County, California. It involves four ranchers putting their lands together, some 16,000 acres, and managing it for waterfowl hunting under our direction. These are all third generation livestock operations that are feeling the pinch and need to generate additional revenues. For a first year operation we

feel it has been very successful. While the profits were not great, it is usually not possible to show any profit at all the first year or two. It was feasible because of numerous advantages of combining their efforts into one program. However, besides sharing management, they also shared in insurance needs, clubhouse use, advertising, and other costs. While combining operations such as this may not work for all landowners, in some cases it should be a consideration for it takes less commitment and profits will likely come sooner.

Maybe these examples sound good, at least to the livestock producer that has wildlife resources and is thinking about managing them for additional revenues. However, it is not all roses either, for there are some problems that need to be addressed.

While the landowner might have the desire, he still must have the wildlife resources and the knowledge or help to manage them, for he will have to at least maintain his present wildlife populations while increasing hunting pressure. Hopefully he can increase wildlife populations while he increases hunting pressure. Good wildlife management allows for that in most cases. For example, in the seven years that we have been hunting elk on a commercial basis on Santa Rosa Island, we have seen the population grow to where there are now close to twice as many elk now than when we did when we started, and of course are increasing our profits as well.

The real job is finding a good wildlife manager with the right experience. It is not easy, for our colleges do not turn out wildlife biologist or managers to work with the land or landowners. In general they are educated and trained to work for state fish and game departments or the federal government. While I am an educated wildlife biologist and had worked for a fish and game department, I was totally unprepared to work in the private sector of game management. If you think about what most state and federal biologist do with their time, it becomes obvious that they lack the experience. Most of their time is involved with population censuses, setting seasons, and solving problems. With the exceptions of waterfowl refuges they have little land to actually manage and to learn from. Also, the only economic considerations they have is how to spend the budget they are given. Quite different from the private land manager that must earn the money from the land. Also, I find that we are developing more specialists in wildlife

biology, when there is really a need for more resource managers that can understand the whole picture and integrate different uses on the land.

The rancher contemplating a game management and hunting program has other issues to deal with that can be of concern. They include just the idea of starting a new business, which in itself can be a major change. It includes setting up new books, finding additional insurance (which can be difficult today), getting involved in advertising and marketing, additional posting and patrolling, and numerous other issues.

One area of concern that needs special attention is predation. Today there is different camps of thought in how predators should be handled. To me it is pretty simple. If you plan to manage game for profit, it does not make a whole lot of sense to have predators harvest them instead of your customers that pay for them. This is not any change in how most ranchers handle predators. However, predation on game species is more than what most landowners are accustomed to with their domestic livestock, and they have to deal with predators they generally are not concerned with if they are managing small game and waterfowl. Besides coyotes they will be concerned with the impacts of skunks, raccoons, and even house cats.

Something else a landowner needs to make his hunting and game management program work is a sympathetic game department and legislation. If you do not work with them and have their support, you may find a time when you would not be able to profitably manage your wildlife resources. Fortunately in the past few years game departments with supporting legislation have been able to help the private landowner that wishes to manage his wildlife. A very positive change in California has been the Private Game Management Program (AB580) that was supported by the California Department of Fish and Game and passed by the Legislature in 1983. Today 22 landowners have developed programs under this new scheme, and with some being quite successful. However, even now there are individuals that are attempting to put a stop to the program or to modify it where it would no longer be viable. Another constructive program that is a help to landowners in managing wildlife is the Chaparral Management Program, where the landowner with state assistance, can manipulate his brushfields by prescribed burning. This can be particularly useful in improving deer range and upland game habitat.

In summary, for those landowners thinking about developing a hunting and game management program on their lands the opportunities and timing could not be

better. However, they must keep in mind it is not easy money and they will have to work at it and treat it as a business.